Navigating a river by its bends

A study on transnational social networks as resources for the transformation of Cambodia

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Abstract

This article explores in what ways first generation Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees create and employ the social capital available in their transnational social networks upon their return to Cambodia. The triangular interdependence between the returnees, their overseas immigrant communities and homeland society is taken as a starting point. The central argument is that Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees build different relationships to Cambodia due to: (1) the influence of their immigrant communities in the countries of resettlement; and (2) the contexts of their exit from Cambodia. Regarding debates on the contribution of returnees to an emergent nation, findings in this multisited casestudy bring forward that ideas of return held by the three parties involved may force remigrants into transnationalism in both host and home countries. Findings also demonstrate that social capital may be seen as a resource or a restraint in the lives of returnees.

Keywords: social capital; transnational social networks; Cambodia; remigration; immigrant community; refugee resettlement

'Life is like a log, floating down the river'

> Returning to Cambodia was really hard. I had to explain to my family here that I did not come back for the money, that I had come to find some kind of satisfaction. But this is where it had to happen… In my experience, your life is like a log floating down the river where the flood was taking place. You just go with the flow. You have to navigate by what you can see. You have to navigate a river by its bends (Interview with a Cambodian American returnee in Phnom Penh, October 2011).

The turbulence of civil war (1970-1975), the Khmer Rouge takeover (1975-1979) and the subsequent Vietnamese intervention (1979-1989) forced many Cambodians into exile. Among the nations that offered refuge, America and France stood out for the number of Cambodia refugees that were accepted for resettlement (Chan 2004, Ong 2003). Decades after these conflicts, overseas Cambodians from these host countries are resettling in Cambodia. The first generations of former refugees, especially, have combined the personal experiences of pre-conflict Cambodia and a prolonged stay in countries of exile with the process of 'getting reacquainted' with post-conflict Cambodia. A country suffering from widespread corruption and often characterized as a hybrid democracy and a fragile state (Becker 1998, Un 2005).

The central question addressed by this article is to explore in what ways first generation Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees create and employ the social capital available in their transnational social networks upon their return to Cambodia. The starting point for the proposed exploration is the triangular interdependence between the returnees, their overseas immigrant communities and homeland society (Cohen 1997).[1] With Basch *et al.* this interdependence is expressed as a dynamic between three interacting ideas about return: firstly, the host country's notions on the returnees' ongoing incorporation into the country of resettlement, secondly, the home country's ideas on the returnees' belonging to their ancestral

nation-state; and thirdly, the returnees' own ideas of a shared belonging and loyalty to both worlds (Basch *et al.* 1994).

In my experience as a management- and communication advisor to the Cambodian Ministry of Environment in Phnom Penh questions on returnees' contributions to transformative change are relevant to the economic, political and social development of Cambodia. However, these issues have not received the attention they deserve. While educated members of the first generation of refugees have arrived back in Cambodia bringing an enormous potential for change through their knowledge, finances and social networks, I have also seen them depart again. They often returned to their host countries as disillusioned people. Regarding returnees to Cambodia, a study of the limited amount of English and French literature on first generation Cambodian returnees confirms the observation that the French and American groups of Cambodian returnees have divergent attitudes towards Cambodia. While there is no merit in cultural stereotyping, previous studies do suggest that this group of returnees that was born in Cambodia, resettled abroad and later returned to Cambodia, has distinct reactions to the Cambodian political and social system (Heder 1995, De Zeeuw 2009). The Cambodian Americans are observed to mainly enter the Non-Governmental (NGO) sector and change the institutions of the country as relative 'outsiders', the Cambodian French, in contrast, often seem to enter government and work within traditional structures (Chan 2004, Le Gal 2010, Poethig 1997). This puzzling situation is generalized here, in order to provide a clear picture of the issue under study.

This study aims to contribute to debates on transnationalism by inquiring into the social capital created and employed in transnational social networks by returnees.

Contrasting hypotheses on the nature of transnationalism relating to returnees' contributions to their homeland are explored.

In recent years, transnational relations have increasingly come under scrutiny. Transnationalism as a concept proposes the idea of a flow of people, information and goods that connects citizens across the world and is a part of the dynamics of globalization (Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992). As has been argued by Al-Ali and Koser, the idea of transnationalism and transnational social fields bringing people together, has removed the relevance of motivations for migratory movements as such. It has redirected attention to the transnational activities that take place after (forced) migration, instead of a continued focus on host or home country activities (Al-Ali and Koser 2002: 4).[2]

There is broad agreement among researchers in the field that transnational behavior takes place both in and through social networks (see, for instance: Landolt 2001, Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). This study assumes that these networks are produced by the attachments formed in transnational social fields and may be interpreted as migrants' means of providing security across borders. As Glick Schiller *et al.* observe, these migrants 'continuously translate the economic and social position gained in one political setting into political, social and economic capital in another' (Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992: 12).

In order to describe the way transnational connections may be used as a resource for the returnees' activities, the concept of social capital is used. An evaluation of the current literature shows that social relations and the social capital they create have mostly been treated as a positive force. However, it is proposed here these can be structures of both constraint and opportunity that are negotiated and

reinforced in the dynamics of interacting individuals (Kilduff and Tsai 2003). For this study, social capital will be defined as: 'The ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures' (Portes 1998:6).

The research was designed as a comparative multiple case-study, whilst acknowledging individual differences and social contexts. The major aims of comparative research are to identify similarities and differences between social entities enabling theories to be formed and tested. Placing immigrant communities in these localities side by side in order to analyze their convergences and contrasts provided a number of insights that will be presented in the Conclusions of this article. However, this research was not meant to bring forward a set of structural cultural and ideological differences between host countries. Moreover, the social capital created and employed in social networks in and between host and home countries was not systematically analyzed with quantitative methods. Rather, evaluations were made through informants' stories on the social networks' cohesion by analysis of their 'narrativizations' on conflict and solidarity. In contrast to personal narratives such as life stories, a narrativization focuses on particular 'selected' experiences considered pivotal by the narrator in semi structured interviews (Atkinson 1998, Kohler Riessman 1993).

The comparative approach was adopted to explore the use of transnational social networks as resources by evaluating the ability of 'actors with sufficient resources to realize their interest' (DiMaggio 1988: 14) against the distinct backgrounds of exile, resettlement and return. Because of the comparative approach, the multisitedness resulted in a form of juxtaposition of that conventionally would be 'worlds apart' (Marcus 1995: 100-102).

Individual cases were built around interviews and documentary research on key informants limited to a selection of Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees working in the governmental or NGO sectors in Phnom Penh. The key informants around which cases were built, varied in their affiliation with governmental and NGO sectors and the degree of change they envisioned. These two sectors were chosen to limit the research population to informants focusing on transformative change in Cambodia through the public sector. The informants selected from these sectors are assumed to aim at contributing to the 'public good'. They were requested to inform this study based on their belonging to the first waves of overseas refugees, i.e. those who left Cambodia before 1980, with the unique quality of being eye-witnesses to, and participants in, the events dividing and reuniting Cambodia and Cambodians overseas. Excerpts from anonymized case studies built around key informants will guide the analysis in this article.

In the following, first, the design and methods of research are introduced. Next, an outline of some key historical events is given as background to the findings and analyses presented in the main section. Transnational social networks in host and home countries are explored as well as the ways in which they may have served as resources for remigration. In the final section, the methodological and theoretical relevance as well as some practical implications are presented.

Methods

Data collection took place in Lyon, France (2010), Long Beach (CA), USA (2011) and Phnom Penh, Cambodia (2010 & 2011). The countrywide Cambodian population in France (2000) was estimated at 63,300 (Nann 2007: 148). Interviews were conducted in the Lyon-region which holds about 14,000 people of Cambodian

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descent. This is one of the largest Cambodian French communities, after Paris and

Marseille (Wijers 2011). The countrywide Cambodian population in the United

States (2000) was estimated at 149,047 (US Census 2000). US interviews were

conducted in the area known as 'Cambodia Town'. The Long Beach Cambodian

American community holds about 30,000 people of Cambodian descent and prides

itself on being the largest Cambodian community outside of Cambodia.

In the localities studied, members and leaders of community organizations

were contacted systematically and asked to assist in the recruitment of other

informants ('snowball sampling': Goodman, 1961). Contacts were asked to refer me

to returnees working in Phnom Penh whom they considered to be 'successful'.

'Successful' was defined as being related to informants' evaluation of their position

within the overseas Cambodian community and their work in Cambodia. In four,

three-month periods of data collection in Lyon, Phnom Penh, Long Beach and

Phnom Penh, the experiences of individual and key-informants were collected

through 129 semi-structured interviews.[3] These interviews were all conducted and

transcribed by me personally in either French or English with occasional use of

Khmer words.

One source of information for this study is provided by 18 American, 14

French and 19 Cambodian governmental and non-governmental organizations that

involved resettled or returned Cambodians. Interviews were supplemented with field

notes taken during social events and through observations in the organizations

studied as well as information from personal, professional and documentary sources.

Findings presented in this article are based on these data from different sources that,

together, have been compiled into the individual case studies on key informants.

Data analysis consisted of, first, the broad analysis of interviews to determine main themes, and secondly, more detailed deductive and inductive coding of the interviews. Finally, in order to follow patterns that had been discovered in the process, fine coding and axial coding. This has brought forward the specific issues and experiences presented in this paper.

Background

In October 1991 the Paris Peace Accords were signed by all Cambodian factions. In 1992 the *United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia* (UNTAC) forces arrived to assist the provisional government in the implementation of these Accords. The aim of the UNTAC intervention was to ensure that democratic elections would take place. Cambodia was now a country 'in transition'. The international forces and the attention that accompanied the financial aid by the international community, were warmly welcomed as essential support needed to make a Cambodian 'renaissance' happen (Becker 1998, Kamm 1998). The transitional regime succeeded in convincing a number of very prominent, and rich, members of the *Anikatchun* [Khmer: lit. 'foreign person'] to return and assist the government. From that period onwards, more returnees would follow.

For many of these early returnees, economic forces and the need to survive forced them into difficult situations. The had to find 'patronage' with political parties or in the governmental service[4] or , for instance, could exploit their dual experiences and education as intermediaries for an international organization. But for many of these returnees, this was perceived as a shortfall in their expectations for renewal in a democratic post-conflict Cambodia (Gottesman 2004, Hughes 2002). These

expectations clashed with the reality of post-conflict restoration and the returnees' need to have a source of income. Thus, the returnees earned themselves a mixed reputation.

The unpopularity of some groups of Cambodian returnees seems bound up with their support and participation in the *Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant Neutre, Pacifique et Coopératif* (FUNCINPEC) (Le Gal 2010). This political party was set up in Paris in February 1981 by Prince Sihanouk through a central committee of a hundred overseas (mostly French) Cambodians. It rapidly grew with members of all levels of the overseas communities, especially in France and the United States so could be seen as a collaborative 'diaspora' project. For many, the FUNCINPEC party embodied their hopes to abandon the traditional political model set by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

The 1993 transitional elections lead to a coalition between FUNCINPEC (who received the most votes) and the CPP. The years following the elections only led to the consolidation of political traditions in the existing CPP, with patronage becoming more and more evident (Gottesman 2004, Un 2005). Following the CPP dominance in rural areas and its effective safeguarding of interests in political institutions, relations within the coalition started to deteriorate. In 1997, the CPP leader and co-Prime Minister, Hun Sen, led a leadership coup, pushing the FUNCINPEC leader Prince Ranariddh into exile in Paris. Many FUNCINPEC members sought and found refuge either in France or in the USA or within the CPP (Roberts 2002).

Social capital in immigrant communities: Lyon & Long Beach

To explore social capital in transnational social networks from the perspective of divergent notions on return, pertinent characteristics of the Lyon and Long Beach Cambodian communities are explored. Distinct host country ideas on 'integration' and the exiled communities' continued loyalty to their home countries are related to individual members' observations on return. This will illustrate some of the similarities as well as the differences between these overseas communities.

Lyon, France

> Cambodian French returnee Madame Pas was born in 1966 into a wealthy family connected to the royal court. There just was no question in those years: if you belonged to the elite, then you would have pride in the French language, culture and customs. If you had the money and, thus, a choice, you would have sent your children and relatives to France well before the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975. As her grandfather refused to leave his country, however, her family never made it there in time.
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> In 1978, Madame Pas' family members finally arrived in Paris. Madame Pas was 12 years old and continued her education at a French school. Her mother remarried, and the family became active in the FUNCINPEC movement that was initiated by Sihanouk. Her family connections and French background later led Madame Pas into a senior position with FUNCINPEC upon their participation in the first elections in Cambodia in 1993.
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> After 18 years of return, Madame Pas now feels thoroughly Cambodian and is happy among 'her' people. She explains that does not get along with the Cambodian community in France. Madame Pas says that she takes issue with those former Cambodian refugees in France who refuse to return at all. She feels suspicious of their proclaimed traumas that, they say, impede return. She has a hard time understanding their opinions about the country. The problem with Cambodia and the Cambodians, overseas and in the country, according to Madame Pas, has much to do with being uneducated, lacking culture and not having the appropriate Cambodian 'knowledge' to behave correctly (Translated from French. Interview Phnom Penh, September 2010).

In contrast to Madame Pas' indefinite return to Cambodia to enter politics in the early 1990s, of the 20 informants interviewed in France in 2010, three say they

refuse ever to return to Cambodia. Others have returned on visits but do not plan on a long term return. There are very few stories on long-term 'successful' returns, i.e. meaning that returnees have found an adequate livelihood and fulfilled their aims to find a local source of income. This is also the case for Madame Pas.

> In hindsight, Madame Pas says, this FUNCINPEC period has left her disappointed and quite empty-handed. She now runs a little shop in the centre of Phnom Penh while occasionally functioning as an advisor on social events.

The story of Madame Pas illustrates the ways in which Cambodian French returnees, the key informants for this research, often hold considerable social status as professionals in the Cambodian French community in France. Additionally, Doctor Kim's story is typical of the situation of those that came to the country as migrants and exchange students before the Khmer Rouge takeover.

> Some 40 years ago, the Khmer Rouge take-over found Doctor Kim in France, where he went in 1973 to finish the studies he had started at a Lycée in Phnom Penh. Suddenly everything changed. Despite the loss of his scholarship financed by the Cambodian government, he managed to finance the rest of his studies through odd jobs. He graduated from the Faculty of Economics at the University of Montpellier in 1978 on a subject related to the development of Cambodia. This issue has remained close to his heart throughout his career.

Just like Doctor Kim, the first generation of exiles from Cambodia upon the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975 could build on their Cambodian French education. They held a cultural awareness that built on the former colonial ties between Cambodia and France. These first exiles could use their existing access to France to resettle there. Often they were of middle- and higher-class background, more educated and more likely to be male than the refugees that followed from 1979 onward. Moreover, they could build on an existing Cambodian French community supporting their process of social adaptation. Their reception was warm and a sense of solidarity was extended to them from French society (Ebihara *et al.* 1994, Meslin 2006).

As Doctor Kim relates: '*La diaspora n'est pas porteuse*', meaning that the returnees do not seem to manage to take responsibility in building Cambodian society (Interview Phnom Penh October 2010). Instead of returning, the Cambodian French first generations seem mostly to channel their funding and goodwill through social networks. They do not physically return but support local organizations in order to contribute to their former home country. Monsieur Sam, a retired Cambodian French engineer in Lyon, describes his thoughts and those of his peers as: 'To really help Cambodia I prefer to stay in France where my social network and physical and financial security are strongest' (Translated from French. Interview Lyon, March 2010).[5]

The community of the resettled Cambodian refugees in France is firmly rooted in traditional Cambodian society. Despite their cultural pride, however, the members of the Cambodian community lead a life 'in the shadows' of French society (Prak 1992: 20-21). Compared to the multitude of distinct cultural expressions by immigrant groups in France, to outsiders, the Cambodian French community is hardly visible. In many ways, as Madame Pas describes, nationalism feeds their ideas on being responsible for the conservation of 'true' Cambodian culture. While building their lives in France, they also founded Buddhist organizations and re-established the role of the pagoda, to be still central to Cambodian French community life. Within the boundaries set by French governmental policy, familiar cultural models are replicated. The educated middle- and upper-classes that were already firmly embedded in France have been important facilitators of this process (Ebihara *et al.* 1994, Moya 2005).

Doctor Kim explains how these groups of the most well-educated multilingual Cambodian returnees from France are clearly at an advantage over other

returnees to Cambodia. According to him they had more skills to apply in order to remain politically neutral and they had more opportunity to use these because of their French background. Those with little education and funding were quickly forced into a partisan position and patronage dependency in order to survive. The solidarity and cohesion in the Cambodian French community made it possible to benefit from existing social networks as resources. Their social capital could thus be 'exported' back to Cambodia and they were able to re-establish their social position in the home country.

Long Beach, California, USA

> Mister Das left Cambodia in June 1979, just after the Pol Pot years. First, he went to the border with Thailand and then on to Bangkok. He was 28 years old and had just finished school. Mister Das' parents owned a little restaurant. They sold their food at the military school where Mister Das was training to be a military police officer.
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> Mister Das is very clear about his unlikely survival of the Khmer Rouge years: 'Basically I am not supposed to be alive at all. A couple of times I was almost dead. I escaped and escaped, and I was just lucky'.
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> In 1980 Mister Das came to the United States. He says, true integration into American society and the sense of being an American citizen have eluded him. He is ambivalent about this lack of belonging: 'I will never be American. I do not consider myself well integrated. I will always be more Khmer'. In the 1990s, Mister Das' thoughts returned to Cambodia. 'Around 1993 I started to think about returning. More and more people were talking about the elections. I was getting bored in the U.S. and my marriage was not working. I was depressed really'
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> After visiting relatives in 1995 and 2001, it took another seven years before Mister Das had found a temporary source of income and he had built up enough savings to help him return to Cambodia for several months. He decided to go and look for ways for him to stay forever (Interview Phnom Penh, November 2011).

Just like Mister Das, a majority of the 40 informants interviewed in the United States hold positive ideas on returning to Cambodia. Additionally, one informant completely refuses to return to Cambodia, eleven others do not exclude the possibility of returning one day, but say they have not yet had the chance.

Members of the community observe that the educated of the first generation and those who cannot find an adequate source of income in the United States, are especially motivated to go back. However, the majority of remaining informants have either been on visits or described to me their 'failed' return and the shame of another remigration back to the US. Ms Kat, a local social worker, comments:

> Many of the community's members did go back. 60-80 per cent did go back to visit family. But I don't know anybody who went back for the long term. I did not see any successful. They come back broke and with a broken family but also with no money (Interview Long Beach, April 2011).

In contrast to the Cambodians in Lyon, the first groups of Cambodian migrants and (later) refugees entering Long Beach could not join an existing community. They were welcomed by a small group of engineering and agricultural exchange students and military 'trapped' in America as relations with Cambodia deteriorated (Clymer 2007). In later waves of refugees, for the many of the so-called 'lost cases'(without family), there was no choice between resettlement countries as they did not have the connections, status or education to be accepted in France and there were few other host countries available (Chan 2003, Ong 2003). Ms Nor, a Cambodian French member of the Long Beach community explains:

> The US felt a big responsibility to relocate the refugees. America first allowed other countries to screen the refugees and admit them. France only accepted educated people. Very few people of an ordinary background were allowed there (Interview Phnom Penh, September 2011).

When it comes to the United States in those years, the infrastructure and approach to refugee resettlement was very different from France. Policies and provisions were focused on ethnic cohesion instead of complete integration into

mainstream society. US governmental researchers summarize the essence of this notion as:

> It is only within a refugee's own ethnic community that this kind of cross-cultural understanding and lasting long-range support can lead to successful social adjustment through meaningful, relevant and cost-effective services (Khoa and Bui 1985: 223-9)

These resettlement policies focus on cohesive, strong immigrant communities representing the 'ethnic' interest. Yet, as the next section will demonstrate, the sense of solidarity that was thus enforced, put pressure on existing social networks.

Adding to these processes of self-exclusion by retreat into immigrant communities, historical reports on the Cambodians' reception paint a grim picture of their marginalization by mainstream society. This is especially true in the gateway city of Long Beach:

> The Cambodian presence (in Anaheim Street) has touched off a violent confrontation with the gangs of the well-established Hispanic Immigrant population and, in small but symbolic numbers, Cambodians are dying again in armed conflict' (Mydans 1991)

Nevertheless, while the foundations of Cambodian society are recreated in Long Beach within institutional boundaries, the variety and volume of needs are paramount. Moreover, religion no longer provides the main centre of community as the Buddhist community spreads itself over a number of small pagodas. Almost half of the informants have changed their denomination to a different religion. Again, the educated first waves of arrivals acted as patrons of the later waves of less well-off arrivals. In the American context, however, this developed under the concurrent pressures of racism, marginalization and government resettlement policies (see also: Um 2006b).

Conflict and Solidarity

> People here are concerned about their own families and their own affairs and not about the community. The Cambodians do not want to be noticed and they do not make controversial statements (Interview Long Beach, February 2011)

Both the Cambodian community in Lyon and in Long Beach may be considered heterogeneous in their social composition. While a majority of informants describe the Cambodian French community as harmonious, in contrast, all of the Cambodian American informants mention conflicts and fragmentation in Long Beach. Almost half of these US-based informants, furthermore, stressed these divisions as structural and serious. This research finds an on-going factionalism between, among others, different generations, political affiliations and professional occupations. The analysis of compiled findings show that ethnic competition, ideological conflict over homeland politics, and a history of conflict due to the distinct backgrounds of refugees coming to the United States are most often blamed for these divisions.

As described by a majority of the Cambodian American informants from Long Beach, this conflict extends to a certain animosity and cultural competition that is felt between the host and home countries. For instance, the establishment of Cambodia Town in Long Beach is often perceived of as an achievement unique to the overseas Cambodians in defiance of criticism from the homeland. General Khieng, a veteran from the army explains:

> When we fight hard to get Cambodia Town, we are here and not there [*Cambodia*]. It's not for someone from Cambodia. It's like if we build a house and somebody from nowhere comes to live in it. It's like we give all the credit to those people! (Interview Long Beach, March 2011)

The Cambodian community in Long Beach may be characterized as one of conflict extending even to transnational relations. This is in contrast to the nature of the Cambodian community in Lyon, which, in the members' perceptions, could be

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summarized as one of solidarity and relatively low expectations. In terms of this research, the clash of different ideas on return seems almost non-existent in Lyon, allowing for employment of the benefits of social capital. Clashes on ideas related to host and home country issues are very evident in Long Beach, creating tensions between factions. The social capital available in social networks is then sometimes a constraint and sometimes a facilitator to the community members' emancipation.

Social capital upon return: Phnom Penh

This section presents findings on the Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees' activities. These findings are based on both archival research and recent interviews. Next, distinctions in the employment of their transnational social networks and the relations between (re)migrant communities are discussed.

Returnees in governmental and NGO sectors

Madame Pas explained to me that it made sense for the Cambodian French returnees to enter government in the UNTAC years, as it was very hard to find French-speaking positions with an NGO in those days. The close ties between France and the Cambodian elite made it relatively easy to find 'patrons' to sponsor a political position and sustain a livelihood. There were very few French NGOs, and UNTAC required knowledge of the English language that was often not found among the Cambodian French returnees. Moreover, in her experience, the French were reluctant to hire 'Cambodians', however long they may have lived in France and had obtained their citizenship, and would rather employ 'real' French nationals (Interview Phnom Penh, October 2011).

Tentative numbers on the social status and activities upon return of the Cambodian French and Cambodian Americans that French returnee members outnumbered their American counterparts in the first governments by about one third (Committee for Free and Fair Elections (COMFREL), 1993 and 1998). However, in recent overviews (2006 and 2009) the Cambodian American returnees working in government have at least equalled the Cambodian French returnees in number (COMFREL, 2006 and 2009).[6] In interviews, these tentative numbers on returnees' positions were nuanced by the observation that advisory positions may be awarded to returnees in a need to find a 'legitimation of policy' and did not necessarily involve having 'a voice' in decision making (see also: Um 2006a). This could demonstrate how it is hard to make a contribution and how many returnees got stuck or side-tracked in their ambitions. Mr. Hui, a Cambodian American politician explains:

> It's not specifically about the returnees, it's really about power and money. In reality it's about control and not about development. Things have changed now since the beginning, when it was very much about safety. Now if you touch the money or the power then you get into trouble. As long as you don't touch the power or the money you will be fine (Interview Phnom Penh, October 2011).

Analysis of the interviews demonstrates that, for the Cambodian French returnees to Cambodia, their transnational networks and their positive linkages to Cambodian French communities and organizations have initially provided them with relatively generous bargaining power. This seems to be related to perceptions of their social status both before and during exile. In this way, historical ties with Cambodia bring returnees from France the benefit of their preferential treatment and expedient inclusion in certain local social networks both in the home and host country. They have a lot of overseas and local social capital to share transnationally. Since 1997, colonial associations with France, the Cambodian French's traditional attitude of

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middle- and upper-class superiority towards the 'locals', and the English language

barrier, have all acted to exclude the Cambodian French from reintegration at other

levels of society.

Informants interviewed in Cambodia express that, over the last decades, the

relatively cautious reception of Cambodian American returnees has evolved into a

warm welcome to people from a country that is perceived to be rich and powerful.

Mrs Lea, a Cambodian American activist that worked for the UN in the 1990s,

observes:

> In Cambodia, before, most people were brought up in French culture and they still think of social status like that. The US cannot come close to it in tradition. But now people think that speaking English is more international (Interview Phnom Penh, October 2011).

Moreover, as a survey of the US Cambodian Embassy's *Information Bulletins* shows,

Cambodian American trade relations and investments are very much appreciated by

the Cambodian government (Royal Embassy of Cambodia 2006-2008). Cambodian

American transnational networks have thus professionalized and taken advantage of

Cambodian as well as American opportunity structures. To effectively seize these

opportunities, however, can prove difficult. Cambodian American Mr. Hui's

explanation is exemplary for several narrativizations on entrepreneurship and

transnational ties:

> We have a few friends who came out to do business and they lost. Maybe their networks weren't very good. They might have gotten themselves into trouble they were not aware of. They ended up in trouble and they got cheated (Interview Phnom Penh, September 2011)

Remigrant Communities: Conflict and Solidarity

In general, 'Cambodian Cambodians', Cambodian French and Cambodian Americans all seem to have fixed ideas on the cultural assets that returnees bring. Although there is little solidarity between groups of returnees within Cambodia (informants make few references to a 'remigrant community'), these remigrants are often grouped and treated as 'foreigners' by the local community. Informants explain the ways in which individual returnees are divided into 'remigrant groups' according to their sending countries. These groups, moreover, are 'ranked' according to perceptions of the image, wealth and influence of these former host countries. While this cultural exclusion does affect their reception, the Cambodian remigrants themselves do not identify with the remigrant divisions imposed on them.

Illustrative of this stereotyping that affects the character of returnees' reception is Cambodian French Dr. Kim's comment on Cambodian American returnees:

> The Cambodian Americans stand out as they are these really flamboyant personalities, especially the people from Long Beach as they were always very politically active and it was kind of expected that they would come here after the elections (Interview Phnom Penh, September 2011).

Next to this 'flamboyance' and 'having a lot of money' the Cambodian Americans were most often described by Cambodian French contributors to this research in terms like: 'undiplomatic' and 'high on human rights'.

Conversely, according to a majority of Cambodian American informants, the Cambodian French are 'hard to connect with' and their contributions rarely materialize because 'they prefer talking to doing'. Cambodian American Mr. Hui describes his experiences with French culture:

> And the French leaders… do you know what they say? 'If you have two Cambodians in France they will form three parties!' (Laughs) That's the difference. The French talk a lot (Interview Phnom Penh, October 2011).

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Inquiries into local social networks demonstrate that there is little communication between Cambodian French and Cambodian American groups of returnees. Experiences of returnees also illustrate processes of cultural exclusion from mainstream Cambodian society as well as showing the limited social networks of Cambodian remigrants. As a Cambodian American of French descent, Ms Nor explains:

> There is not [a] Cambodian American community here. I don't feel I belong to the group. The Cambodian French and Cambodian Americans never meet and they could never work together, there are so many contradictions here. Then again, I don't get accepted by my Cambodian French friends either. They don't say they are Khmer, they say they are French when they are here (Interview Phnom Penh, September 2011)

Conclusions

The context of a specific locality matters in understanding the exploitation of social capital available in social networks. Returnees' creation and employment of social capital cannot be understood fully without situating them in the institutional structures, histories, and politics of a particular area. Lyon, Long Beach and Phnom Penh each have very different characters, resources, ethnic populations, economies and ideologies. Moreover, France and Cambodia as well as the USA and Cambodia share widely divergent historical relationships and this affects the resources available in the transnational networks tying together these countries. This not only influences the ways in which the Cambodian resettlers are 'integrated' but also affects the strategies they pursue in order to fulfill their ambitions. I want to propose that the group identity of Cambodians in each locality involved in a comparative research design needs to be analyzed as a convergence of people, place, and perceptions of a shared past.

In a comparison between Cambodian American and Cambodian French returnees, their links to multiple sites may prove to be either a resource or a restraint for their activities upon return. This may depend on factors such as political context, institutional structures and geopolitical relations. The Cambodian returnees' transnationalism takes place indirectly through social networks as well as being a direct physical presence passing national borders. Informants' experiences confirm what Tsuda (2003) has proposed that for returnees' 'Geography is destiny'. This means that the geopolitical position of a host country affects the returnees' reception, and social legitimacy, in the home country.

Positive attributes are assigned to immigrant networks, generally, at both an individual and collective level. Opportunities for 'integration' to a host country may be stimulated by a centralized government with strong institutions that create strong ties to its citizens, for example, through pensions, welfare or other government benefits. The negative effects of immigrant social ties, however, are often underestimated. Current findings on the host country's Cambodian French and Cambodian American communities show that, undeniably, bonding within immigrant groups may provide useful resources for resettlement. However, as demonstrated by the experiences within the Long Beach Cambodian community, host country ideological conflicts still simmer and the perceptions on affiliations to one group may restrict members' access to competing factions.

I propose that national structures and ideologies for resettlement may achieve the opposite of what they set out to do. Like trying to squeeze a fist full of sand, the grains will only slip away and disperse instead of clinging together. Within rigid contexts enforcing 'community' or 'assimilation' some returnees 'navigate the river

by its bends' and are able to survive by employing their social capital to enhance their individual status. It seems, however, that a majority of returnees get stuck in institutional structures and conflicting ideologies in both host and home countries. Cambodian Americans, especially, shared stories of becoming isolated while following the flows imposed on them by institutions.

For returnees, there is no predetermined 'right' or 'wrong' in their processes of resettlement, they just have to go with the flow. This research proposes that a continuing denial of migrants' multiple geographical ties and the clash of the different ideas on resettlement that returnees have to deal with, will restrict the fulfillment of their contributions to the multiple localities they may call 'home' . Therefore, findings in this study support policy makers' efforts to establishing efficient and effective transnational institutional mechanisms for resettlement in host and home countries. Future research will have to produce more detailed insights in the ways these may facilitate the returnees' efforts and open up opportunities for them.

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[1] While it is clear that nation-state policies are influential, and they are addressed as such in the following, they are not the primary context for comparison. This research looks at forms of social capital and compares these from one locality to another in a multisited research design. While these localities may be considered illustrative when it comes to relative scalar size and positioning on a national level, they are both part of a distinct dynamic of historical forces and cultural practices that shape relationships.

[2] In this article, also, terminological ambiguity cannot be avoided. In the following, the home- and hostlands are often referred to, by lack of more adequate terms, as places of ideological belonging that force their expectations upon the returnees. In

order to ground transnational behaviors and bring forward the lives and experiences of the Cambodian returnees, this choice is made to describe their unique experiences.

[3] Individual informants in Lyon, Long Beach, CA and Cambodia, were interviewed for –at least- an hour. Key informants were interviewed several times and for several hours.

[4] When it comes to the current political culture in Cambodia, Ayres (1999) argues that this is an environment that is still dominated by a (neo)traditional system of governance and administration based on the culturally entrenched notions of hierarchy and power found in patron-client relations. Building on the relations surrounding the Cambodian royal court in the past, and inspired on Indian and Chinese aristocratic ordering, this system of 'patronage' or ' clientelism' is characterized by the centralized powers of government that allows access to resources conditioned on subordination, compliance or dependence on the goodwill of patrons (Roniger 2004: 353).

[5] Unfortunately no statistics on Cambodian French or Cambodian American return are available at diplomatic agencies or governmental organizations.

[6] These directories do not provide an exhaustive overview of the member of governments' backgrounds so these numbers may be considered indicative.

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